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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8525  
INFO RUEHKV/AMEMBASSY KYIV 0006  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2215

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000754

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR DS/IP/SCA, DS/IP/WMD, DS/CC, M/MED, L AND SA/INS  
NEW DELHI FOR LEGAL ATTACHE  
KYIV FOR RSO (SEE PARA. 6 FOR DETAILS)

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [PTER](#) [AMED](#)  
SUBJECT: POLICE DETAIN SUSPECT IN JUNE WHITE POWDER  
INCIDENT THAT CLOSED AMEMBASSY COLOMBO

REF: A. COLOMBO 631  
[1](#)B. COLOMBO 619  
[1](#)C. DS IMS CASE RS-2008-00122

This message contains an action request. See para. 7 for action requested.

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary - The Sri Lanka Police Service (SLPS), working at the behest of RSO Colombo, located and detained a subject believed to have delivered the envelope containing the white powder (ref B and C) that closed AmEmbassy Colombo for normal business for a week in June. Subsequent to his detention, the subject admitted that he had, in fact, delivered the envelope. Subject stated that the powder was sacred ash and that he hoped to win American converts to a religious sect of which he is a devotee. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) As reported ref B, an unknown individual delivered an envelope to the Chancery on June 25, 2008. Local guard force (LGF) members assigned to the compound access control (CAC) building received the envelope and made the individual sign a delivery logbook. The subject signed his name "B. SATHYOHAHATHAN," and listed an address in Colombo. LGF staff were suspicious of the envelope and notified mail room personnel, who took the envelope to a secondary mail screening area. Upon opening the envelope, the mail room clerk discovered that it contained a suspicious powdery substance. After learning of the incident, the RSO, in consultation with DS/IP/WMD, closed down the CAC. The CAC remained closed for a week, during which a local laboratory tested the powder for pathogens, including anthrax. Post re-opened the CAC and resumed normal operations on July 1, after the laboratory determined that the powder was benign (ref A).

[1](#)3. (SBU) RSO Colombo provided investigative leads (entries from the delivery logbook and images from the digital video recorders in the CAC) to the SLPS. On August 12, 2008, RSO's Foreign Service National Investigator (FSNI) accompanied the SLPS to the address that the suspect had listed in the logbook. That address was 18/3/1, Ramakrishna Road, Colombo [1](#)6. The FSNI showed photographs of the suspect to individuals living in the residence, who confirmed that the subject who appeared in the photos did, in fact, live at the residence. However, he was not at home at the time. FSNI and SLPS investigators remained in the area, staking out the address until the suspect returned home at approximately 15:00 hr. Police investigators detained the subject and identified him as Bavananthan ((SATHYOJAATHAN)), DPOB: 12/09/1983; Jaffna, Sri Lanka. SLPS transported SATHYOJAATHAN to the Colpetty police station (the station near the Embassy, with jurisdiction for investigating the incident). Investigators allowed the FSNI to assist in the interview. SATHYOJAATHAN,

an ethnic Tamil, did not speak Sinhalese nor could the police speak Tamil. However he did speak English, so the FSNI was able to translate for both the suspect as well as the police.

14. (SBU) SATHYOJATHAN admitted that he was the person who had delivered the powder-laden envelope to the Embassy. SATHYOJATHAN even described the method by which he packaged the powder - one envelope contained within another envelope, to prevent powder from leaking before the letter reached the desk of the U.S. Ambassador (to whom he had addressed his letter). SATHYOJATHAN averred that the powder was "Vibhuti" (sacred ash derived from burned cow dung). (RSO note - this fact may explain why initial tests of the suspect powder were not immediately negative for anthrax, though subsequent tests did rule out anthrax.) SATHYOJATHAN denied that there was a criminal motive behind his delivery of the substance. Rather, he claimed that the powder was intended as a blessing upon Americans. SATHYOJATHAN claimed that he was a devotee of "Sathya Sai Sri Baba," and that his letter had contained emblems and drawings denoting his faith. He said he had hoped that the letter, along with the sacred powder, would help some Americans convert to Sai Baba devotees. SATHYOJATHAN explained further that he chose the American Embassy because he knew that few Americans were devotees of his faith. He later admitted to the FSNI that he was also perturbed because some "high American officials" had made public statements that denigrated Sri Sai Baba, and he had hoped that the powder would work as a charm to win over converts among these officials. SATHYOJATHAN denied that he had received instructions from anyone else to deliver the powder-laden letter and averred that he was solely responsible for his actions.

15. (SBU) Police arrested and detained SATHYOJATHAN after recording his statement. He will appear before a magistrate on August 13, after which he may be released on bail. The SLPS chief inspector advised that he would seek an opinion from the Sri Lanka Attorney General's office regarding how to charge the suspect. The chief inspector opined that SATHYOJATHAN was subject to charge as a "public nuisance" under Sri Lanka's Vagrant Act.

16. (SBU) Biographical data on the suspect:

Name: Bavananthan SATHYOPATHAN (English translation of Sinhala spelling of surname) or SATHYOJATHAN (English translation of Tamil spelling of surname)  
DPOB: December 9, 1983; Jaffna, Sri Lanka  
Current address: 18/3/1, Ramakrishna Road, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka  
Previous address: B1 3/3, Soyza Flats, Soyzapura, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka  
National Identity Card number: 83 344 5057 V  
Marital status: Single

Subject claims to be a fourth year undergraduate student of the Medical Faculty of Sumy National University, Luganska, Ukraine.

17. (SBU) Action requested: As noted above, RSO Colombo provided investigative leads from various Embassy documents and security devices to the SLPS. In anticipation of a possible prosecution, RSO Colombo requests that DS/IP coordinate with the Office of Legal Adviser to obtain authorization to release official U.S. Embassy records pertaining to the case to local prosecutors. Such records may include certified copies of the delivery logbook entries recorded on June 25, 2008, as well as freeze-frame photographs and digital recordings from digital video recorders installed in the CAC. RSO Colombo also requests authorization for FSNI Gamini Ekanayake to testify in future court proceedings related to the case, when subpoenaed.

18. (U) RSO Colombo will continue to monitor the investigation and report updates septel. Point of contact for this message is RSO Michael V. Perkins, who may be contacted at 94.11.249.8756, 94.11.249.8888 (MSG Post 1 after regular business hours), and via the Department of State unclassified

and classified email systems (perkinsmv@state.gov and  
perkinsmv@state.sgov.gov, respectively).  
BLAKE